

Harry Potter and the teaching of classics

Tim Whitmarsh

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix has become the fastest-selling book in publishing history. Released on June 21st 2003 (the summer solstice, a suitably mystical day), the book generated pandemonium in bookshops throughout the world. For a while, even the Beckhams were left basking in the shade. One question, though, was on the lips of everyone. Or, at least, everyone that *Omnibus* spoke to. Would this book encourage rolling waves of interest in the classical world?

Joanne Rowling graduated from Exeter University in 1990, with a 2:2 in (what is now called) Classical Studies and French. Her own reminiscences of her university days seem to be dominated by cafés and socialising; and her respectable but hardly earth-shattering degree result gives no sense of deep engagement with the intellectual subject-matter of her course. Her lecturers remember her as an amiable dabbler, little more.

Rowling back the years

Despite her apparent lack of effort with her studies, however, the past (understood in the broadest terms) plays a crucial imaginative role in the novels. When Harry leaves the grinding tedium of the Dursleys' house in Privet Drive for the magical world, he is not just exchanging bourgeois certainties for a panorama of unforeseen possibilities; he is also travelling backwards in time, from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries towards a past that amalgamates various historical periods. Only Muggles (and Muggle enthusiasts like Arthur Weasley) have any interest in technological invention: wizards and witches live in an environment that remains largely unchanged over the years (notwithstanding the endless stream of new broomstick models).

The flavour of this world, however, is principally a mixture of Victorian and mediaeval, and not classical. Hogwarts is clearly modelled on a nineteenth-century public school, with its Dickensian teachers, its houses, prefects, dormitories, mottoes and sporting competitions. And the presence within the grounds of the magic forest, with its unicorns and centaurs, gives the school an additional aura of mediaeval folklore (folklore which, of course, did appeal greatly to the Victorians). In the films, the mediaevalism of the school is underlined by the use of Alnwick Castle and Durham Cathedral as locations.

Dead languages

Not that Rowling is beyond using motifs drawn from ancient literature and mythology. To take but one example: in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, the entrance to the school's inner sanctum is guarded by a three-headed dog (named, it later transpires, 'Fluffy'). The passage of Harry, Ron and Hermione into the hidden belly of Hogwarts is subtly linked to Heracles' and Aeneas' visits to the underworld, the entrance to which is guarded by the three-headed dog Cerberus. Like his classical predecessors, Harry descends to greet ghosts of his own past, to stare death in the face, and to survive, with a renewed and powerful vision of his role for the future. Rowling's 'underworld' is, among other things, a place where the ghosts from the author's literary past manifest themselves (which puts her in exalted company: Virgil and Dante exploited this device too).

But though Fluffy clearly serves as a classical allusion at one level, there is no suggestion that readers are to take him as a representative of anything other than the Victorian-mediaeval world that dominates the narratives. There are, for example, no classicising signals described at this point in the book: no columns or pillars, frescos or arches. Indeed, the choice of a harp as the instrument that eventually soothes him to sleep quite conspicuously passes up the opportunity to classicise (a lyre, pipes or a flute might just as easily have been chosen).

An education for life

Why this avoidance of classical settings, given both Rowling's background and the great potential the ancient world might have offered? The answer is not hard to find: the context of the Potter books, whether magical or Muggle, is very much English. The place-names, in particular, are assertively English. Ottery St Mary, for example, the basis for Ottery St Catchpole (where the Weasleys live), is a village of otherworldly quaintness just outside Exeter. The 'hogwart' is an old English plant (growing, incidentally, in abundance in the garden of the hostel where she lived as a student). In stark contrast with, for example, Philip Pullman, Rowling never makes her central characters travel from England (in the new novel, Hagrid journeys to Russia; but the journey is only described to Harry and the others after he has returned). Rowling does, to be sure, carefully integrate various 'ethnic' characters (Seamus, Cho, Parvati), but it is easy not to take this for rather crude tokenism.

Within this limited world, however, classical learning plays a crucial role. As any Victorian school should, Hogwarts places a high premium on the learning of Latin. The school's motto (*Draco dormiens numquam titillandus*: 'never tickle a sleeping snake') is in Latin. More importantly, the spells the students struggle to master – except for swotty Hermione – are also (usually) Latinate. Some are *bona fide* Latin, such as *expecto patronum* ('I anticipate my patron'), the spell for conjuring one's 'patron' (or protector). Others, such as *expelliarmus* (used to rid an opponent of an object) or *petrificus totalus* (which solidifies an adversary) are bastardised Latin. A small category of spells (like *stupefy*), are, to be sure, in English. But the joke still stands: learning Latin spells in Hogwarts is the equivalent of learning Latin in a nineteenth-century English public school.

Now magical spells across most cultures require verbal incantation, and the key factor in magical formulae is usually that they should be unintelligible to mainstream language-speakers. *Abracadabra*, for example. If this holds true for the Harry Potter spells, then the role of the Latin is simply to provide a mystifying alternative to English. But this fails to explain why specifically Latin has been chosen. It is true that throughout history, many spells have been composed in bastardised Latin; but it is equally true that many have not been. The explanation for Rowling's choice must lie in the playful parody of the Victorian public school system and the central role it gave to classical education.

Certainly, the eccentric teachers of Hogwarts reflect the stereotypes of classics schoolmasters. Professor Binns, with his excruciating droning, could perhaps represent the worst of any kind of education. But Professor Snape, the Potions teacher (lest

we forget, Harry's least favourite), employs the exact combination of rote learning and sadism that readers will associate with traditional lessons in Latin and Greek grammar. His first name, Severus ('severe'), is all too appropriate. An example from *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*: 'I would have thought that after over two months of lessons you would have made some progress ... we will start again' (p. 521).

At one level, it is hard to imagine these depressingly familiar caricatures doing anything more than appealing to a wholly mistaken but widespread prejudice against classical teaching. Interestingly, Rowling's own experiences seem to have been wholly positive. In an interview given to the *Daily Mail* last year, she named a certain professor of Greek among the three 'men of her life' (whatever that means ...) But these positive experiences do not seem to have translated into positive representations of classics teaching within the books. It is not that there are not good teachers, like the generous Dumbledore or the sure-footed McGonagall; but they are the ones that are not directly linked to classics.

Transferable skills

From this perspective, it is hard to see that there is much to cheer about in the portrayal of classics teaching in the Harry Potter books. But there is one character to cheer the classicist's heart, and this is the unlikely figure of the ministry official in *The Order of the Phoenix*. Dolores Umbridge's name betokens her role in the plot: the first name means 'woes' in Latin, the second puns on 'umbrage' (meaning 'resentment'). She is imposed upon the school by the ministry, and immediately sets about putting into practice a series of educational decrees that rile teachers and students alike.

Her portrayal clearly represents a satire upon government-centralised, quango-driven waffle in the contemporary educational system. Her opening speech sends most of the students to sleep, but Hermione picks up on a crucial phrase: 'progress for progress' sake must be discouraged' (p. 193). Within the narrative, these words are crucial in that they foreshadow Umbridge's changes to the school's teaching practice. But for many readers, they will serve as an echo of the infamous attack by Charles Clarke, Secretary of State for Education, upon classics as 'education for education's sake' (in the *Sunday Times*, May 2003). It would be perhaps inhumane to wish on Mr Clarke the fate that befalls Dolores Umbridge in the book. Even so, it is cheering to see such strong support, albeit with a degree of subtlety that might evade a politician, in the course of a book that has reached such a phenomenally wide readership.

Tim Whitmarsh teaches classics at Exeter University, but moved there too recently to have had any chance of a guest appearance in the Harry Potter novels. He is also on the editorial committee of Omnibus.